Music biz blues: hot new releases burn out

By Chris Morris

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Music retailers suffered their steepest sales decline in three years during 2005.

Compared with 2004 -- which, in a tic of the calendar, had a 53-week retail year -- the market for CDs plunged more than 10%. Based on a 52-week year, sales were down nearly 8%.

This crash -- the worst since 2002, which witnessed a plummet of 10.7% -- was all the more dizzying for retailers because the business appeared to be rebounding in 2004, when sales rose a modest but encouraging 3.8%.

Sadly, the writing was on the wall throughout the fourth quarter this year. In what is traditionally the critical period for stores, a parade of new titles experienced immediate and sharp sales spikes. Album sales were buoyed at year's end by some long-running titles, greatest-hits compilations and a new entry in the perennially best-selling "Now" series.

In the entire fourth quarter of 2005, only one album enjoyed two consecutive weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard 200: Eminem's hits collection "Curtain Call."

No new release was impervious to speedy sales attrition during the last three months of the year.

Country singer Gretchen Wilson's sophomore release "All Jacked Up," the sequel to her multiplatinum 2004 debut "Here for the Party," entered at No. 1 in early October with a 263,000-unit week, according to Nielsen SoundScan data. Its second week, sales fell by 54%; its third week saw a 52% drop.

R&B luminary Alicia Keys' "Unplugged" bowed at the apex of the chart in October with 196,000 units sold. It plunged 57% its second week, and slid another 40% in its third frame.

Pop starlet Ashlee Simpson's second album "I Am Me" arrived at No. 1 in late October with 220,000 units sold. The CD saw drops of 66% and 25% in succeeding weeks.

Top country performer Kenny Chesney's "The Road and the Radio" climbed to No. 1 in mid-November with a 469,000-unit debut. The title then slid 59% its second week, only regaining ground with a 58% increase in the post-Thanksgiving sales surge.

"Confessions on a Dance Floor," Madonna's much-trumpeted return to dance music, hit No. 1 in November behind a 350,000-unit debut stanza. But immediate freefall ensued: The album fell 39% in its second week and 49% in its third.

The softness of the year-end titles might be reflected in the concurrent strength of a number of compilations.

"Now 20," the latest package of recent hit tracks, bowed at No. 1 in early November with 378,000 units sold. It remained lashed into the top five ever since; remarkably, it returned to No. 1 in early December.

The farewell hits collection from disbanding R&B trio Destiny's Child, "#1's," debuted at No. 1 in late October with a modest 113,000-unit week. But the album's sales eroded rapidly, and it had fallen out of the top 10 by its fourth week.

Boosted by the box office success of the Johnny Cash biopic "Walk the Line," a career-spanning set by the country vocalist crept into the top 10 in late December, reaching No. 10 with a 158,000-unit week.

It somehow seems appropriate that in a year of short-legged chart sprinters, the sales champ proved to be a distance runner.

Mariah Carey capped a triumphant year last week when her Island comeback album "The Emancipation of Mimi" topped rapper 50 Cent's "The Massacre" in total sales. The title, which has sold more than 4.8 million units, has been a fixture near the top of the Billboard 200 since its debut in April.

"The Massacre," which trailed Carey's title by a mere 32,000 units after last week's tally, had the biggest debut week (1.1 million units in March) and the longest run at No. 1 (five weeks). But, true to rap form, Fitty's release burned brightly yet quickly; the collection sold nearly 3 million units of its 4.8 million-unit total in those first five weeks at the top.

The rapper's fourth-quarter release, the soundtrack for his starring film vehicle "Get Rich or Die Tryin.," is viewed in most quarters as a comparative disappointment. After a fast start at No. 2 in November, the album, like the film, faded quickly and has sold 1 million units to date.

In an interesting measure of consumer fickleness, both "The Emancipation of Mimi" and "The Massacre" received big chart bumps when -- taking a page from Usher's long-running hit "Confessions" -- they were re-released in enhanced editions containing fresh music and video content.

Besides Carey's release, strong year-end performances by the Black Eyed Peas' six-month-old "Monkey Business" and Kelly Clarkson's year-old "Breakaway" and a resilient showing by Canadian rock act Nickelback's "All the Right Reasons" provided some solace to battle-weary retailers.

Yet, in another dispiriting reminder that the music game is being played differently these days, one of the biggest year-end titles wasn't visible on the charts because it is being sold exclusively by one retailer.

Mass merchant Wal-Mart claimed initial sales of a half-million units for country superstar Garth Brooks' "Limited Series," a six-CD boxed set that went
on sale in late November. Because of the proprietary nature of the collection, it does not appear on Billboard's weekly rundown.

Reuters/Hollywood Reporter